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## Trans-Pacific Imaginaries and Queer Intimacies in the Ruins of Middlesex

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DAI KOJIMA

## ***Trans-Pacific Imaginaries and Queer Intimacies in the Ruins of Middlesex***

This essay meditates on a kind of method that reads into and around an obtuse object/subject that allows for different relationalities among characters and histories to emerge in the ecology of a novel. Alongside Sandilands's, Seymour's, and Singh's readings in this special cluster, I want to think with Roland Barthes's notion of the "third meaning" in order to read minor characters against the economy of the plot and the progression of history in the novel. Barthes outlines that outside the first meaning (the plot) and second meaning (cultural references), there exists an alternate meaning, that is, the *third meaning*: something that is out of place or escapes established systems of signification. In particular, I want to apply Barthes's notion of the third meaning to the minor character of Julie Kikuchi in order to examine what her flickering presence might reveal to us about Japanese figurations in the American imaginary.

First, Japan is itself a minor yet powerful character in *Middlesex*. Historically, figurations of Japan and its subjects have taken multiple and shifting forms in North American popular imaginaries. These include: the exotic and alien dwellers in the Far East, the vicious and violent colonizers of East Asia, the victims of atomic bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the survivors of internment policies in the US and Canada. Post-internment and post-assimilation, Japanese North Americans are now figured as model minorities.

Of all of these, it is the figure of Japan as an "economic animal" in which I am most interested and which contributes directly to the eventual decay of the Detroit auto industry and the city's urban ecologies. As outlined in the novel, due to skyrocketing prices during the oil crisis in the early 1970s and the advantage of Japan's much smaller, fuel-efficient cars, the American auto industry was unable to compete. Fuelled by a protectionist US auto industry and media, anti-Japanese sentiment, which figured the Japanese as vicious, animal-like and greedy, rose sharply. This figuration had violent consequences. Japan's influence in the decline of the US auto industry arguably contributed to the worsening economic instability and racial tensions that resulted in the Detroit race riots. As discussed by Anna Tsing, the figuration of Japan as an evil, economic beast led to murder. Tsing explains:

The success of Japanese cars was particularly painful to American pundits who had become used to thinking of the US economy in relation to its cars . . . [some] business leaders sought US reprisals against Japan. A wave of public fear emerged. One index was the 1982 murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin, mistaken for a Japanese by unemployed white auto workers in Detroit. (115)

Figurations encompass more than simple imaginaries, and have very real, material impacts. But as Tsing reminds us, there are other ways of telling these stories: “this is not just a story, then, but also a method; big histories are always best told through insistent, if humble, details” (111). The character of Julie Kikuchi adds an important texture to Japanese elements in the novel and offers an aperture through which we might ask: what trans-Pacific imaginaries are at work in *Middlesex*, which humble details of history? How might we read Julie and Cal’s encounter not as a historical inevitability, but instead as a reparative possibility of queer intimacy that subtends established narratives of war, automotive economics, race, and globalization?

In their first and second encounters, Julie appears to be nothing more than Barthes’s first meaning. That is, she is a plot point along the way to Cal’s journey of self-acceptance. Cal sees Julie the first time on the train: she “was Asian, at least genetically. Her black hair was cut in a shag . . . . The placidity of her countenance along with the smoothness of her skin made her face appear like a mask, with living, human eyes behind it” (Eugenides 40). At this point, I think it is fair to say that between the “placid” and “smooth” “mask” of Julie’s appearance, we are well along the path towards an Orientalist romance. However, when Julie and Cal first kiss, Julie is given an opportunity to begin signalling the second meaning, or cultural references, of such an Orientalization:

When the kiss was over [Julie] opened her eyes very wide.  
“I thought you were gay when we met,” she said.  
“Must have been the suit.”  
“My gay-dar went off completely,” Julie was shaking her head. “I’m always suspicious, being the last stop.”  
“The last what?”  
“Haven’t you ever heard of that? Asian chicks are the last stop. If a guy’s in the closet, he goes for an Asian because their bodies are more like boys.” (184)

Julie’s “last stop” invokes the very well-worn trope of “Asian-Woman-Heals-White-Man’s-Fragile-Sexuality.” Female gendered and feminized queer Asian bodies become sites of healing, self-understanding, and affirmation, not for those Orientalized bodies, but for the white men who profit by them. However, I think it is important for us to attempt to read this moment and the final consummation of their relationship generously, especially if we are to take seriously and have some degree of respect for, and give dignity to, Julie’s interior motivations or desires, even if Eugenides does not grant her such interiority as a character.

After this kiss, Cal avoids Julie and fails to call her; it seems that the romance has fizzled. However, they meet again at an art exhibit and Cal discloses his intersexuality to her. Julie does not reject him as he had feared and they retire to his apartment.

[Julie] switches off the lights.  
“Wait a minute,” [Cal] said. “Are you turning off the lights because of you or because of me?”

“Because of me.”

“Why?”

“Because I am a shy, modest Oriental lady. Just don’t expect me to bathe you.” (513)

Once they are naked in bed, Cal quips:

“I might be your last stop, too,” I said, clinging to her. “Did you ever think of that?” And Julie Kikuchi answered, “It crossed my mind.” (514)

This moment exemplifies what José Esteban Muñoz calls the minor agency of “affective performativity” through which racialized, minoritarian female subjects simultaneously enact and resist the dominant scripts and expectations of their historical and emotional situations (250). It would be easy, and no less true, to critique Julie and Cal’s relationship as a simple case of overt Orientalism, yoked to the salvation of Cal’s masculinity. However, I want to argue that it should bother us that such a reductive reading denies Julie access to even a small amount of depth of character. Instead, Julie’s playful identification of herself as a “shy, modest Oriental lady” forces Cal to relate to her differently and to acknowledge that she is aware of his Orientalist impression of her. At the same time, her humorous assertion opens up the possibility of something more dynamic than the limits of fate and choice. Put differently, just as Shi Pei Pu in *M. Butterfly* (Hwang) does, Julie’s character resists an easy dismissal of her agency precisely through her subscription to such obscurity and secretiveness.<sup>1</sup>

The withheld stories of Julie invite us as readers to imagine the answers to such questions as: what is the history of Julie’s family? What are the stories we are not being told? Who is Julie Kikuchi? Amidst its expansive stories of a Greek family epic and intersex becoming, *Middlesex* contains another epic, another story of transnational migrations, encounters, and becomings: how does Julie Kikuchi come to be in Berlin in the first place? This is exactly the kind of questioning that belongs to “tomorrow’s politics,” as Barthes argued (62-63). Julie is an interruption of the easy flattening of Japanese figurations as either dominant or dominated; she is an opportunity to think otherwise concerning queer futures beyond “the last stop.”

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Julietta Singh for her insightful comment during our panel about the connection between *Middlesex* and *M. Butterfly*.

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